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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT SAMBI ANNOUNCES WISH TO EXTEND MANDATE

REF: A) 08 ANTAN 821
B) 08 ANTAN 809

¶1. (SBU) In a New Year's speech Comoran President Sambï expressed his intention to ask the electorate, by referendum, to extend his term in office by one year until 2011. The President stated he wants "twelve more months at the country's helm so that I can complete the projects I promised to undertake." Sambï said 2009 would be a prosperous year for the Comoros as new money comes in as a result of the economic citizenship law (REF B).

¶2. (SBU) Proposed revisions to the constitution have not been made public nor has the President set a firm date for the upcoming referendum; though he told us it would make sense for it to coincide with the National Assembly election due in April. Union officials have stated that the revisions include giving the Union President the authority to dissolve the National Assembly and also giving the National Assembly the power to censure Union officials. The island "presidents" would be renamed "governors" and their staff would be stripped of the "minister" title to instead be "counselors." Offering little detail aside from the President's announcement that he wishes to remain in office until 2011, the revision also includes a provision to "harmonize" the various mandates of different officials to reduce the frequency, and thus the cost, of elections. At present, the Union President's four-year mandate is due to end in May 2010; island presidents of Grande Comore and Moheli have five-year terms due to end in 2012; and due to the delayed election in Anjouan, that president's five-year term may be considered to run until 2013 (note: whether his mandate runs through 2012 or 2013 is unclear). It is assumed, though not clear, that the vote on extending Sambï's term in office by one year until 2011 would be included in the constitutional referendum, perhaps as part of a package of compromises by which all mandates would co-terminate in ¶2011.

Opposition Reaction

¶3. (SBU) Predictably, opposition leaders immediately made statements criticizing Sambï for wanting to remain in power. Moheli island president Ali Said issued a public statement protesting Sambï's announced intentions and publicly called on the international community to assure that elections are held in 2010. (NOTE: The next president, due to be elected in 2010, must come from Moheli under the rotation system. END NOTE.) A spokesman for Grande Comore island president Abdouwahabi called Sambï "anti-democratic" and accused the Union president of misleading voters in order to accumulate power and remain in office. Opposition leaders in the National Assembly reiterated their argument that Sambï's constitutional revision has not been transparent and that parliament has not been consulted about proposed changes.

¶4. (SBU) COMMENT: At the last meeting with the Ambassador in December, President Sambï seemed "popular and assertive" (REF A), and this latest move only reaffirms this judgment. He has repeatedly said the constitutional referendum is needed for the

Union to have sufficient authority to govern and develop the Comoros. While Sambi's opponents (and Post) have long suspected that he might attempt to extend his mandate beyond 2010, this is the first time he has publicly stated this intention. The President now appears convinced that the electorate supports him strongly enough for him to prevail, and that the opposition is too weak and divided to block him; we suspect he is right on both counts. At the same time, this controversial development could potentially unravel the Comoros' current delicate political balance. END COMMENT.

MARQUARDT